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Introduction – Managing Welfare Expectations and Social Change: Policy Responses in Asia

Ka Ho Mok, Stefan Kühner and Nicola Yeates*

Abstract

The question whether Asian welfare types can be classified as distinctly ‘productivist’ has remained subject to lively debates: in East Asia, the recent implementation of social rights-based public policy innovations – including working family support – as a response to rising inequalities, welfare expectations and accelerating social change has been well documented; similarly, South East Asian and South Asian economies have featured much more frequently in comparative social policy analysis as policymakers have sought to address persisting chronic poverty, a diminishing demographic dividend and burdensome epidemiological transitions via integrating human capital formation with social protection measures. Yet, far from a unifying convergence of these social policy trends in the post-Millennium Development Goals era, the global perspective we take in this article suggests continued variation and difference, with a multiplicity of forms of globalizations encountered and/or engendered in diverse contexts. As a consequence, variegated and path-dependent patterns of social development continue to persist across Asian economies. These findings, in turn, address major issues of our time, for they speak to the broader question of what analytical bases and research strategies can best reveal the complexities of (and interactions between) national, extra-national and transnational drivers of welfare formation and development under contemporary but diverse conditions.

Keywords

Global social policy; Asian social development; Productivism; Post-productivism; Divergence

Managing Welfare Expectations and Social Change

Ever since the publication of Esping-Andersen’s (1990) classic *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, comparative social policy analysis has been dominated by the ‘welfare state modelling debate’, tackling questions such as ‘How many welfare models exist globally?’, ‘Are specific cases correctly classified as members of distinct ideal-types?’, ‘Are classifications based on appropriate dimensions and measurements of social policy’ and ‘What are the drivers of welfare state development and change’ (see e.g. Powell and Barrientos 2011). In regards to the classification of welfare typologies, an early claim posited that Esping-Andersen (1990) overlooked key features of a distinct

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‘productivist’ world of welfare, in which economic goals drive social policy and investment in human capital production dominates (Holliday 2000; Hudson and Kühner 2011). The role of human capital formation in addressing increased global competition has been of particular importance for Greater Chinese and East Asian welfare strategies (Walker and Wong 2005; Kwon and Holliday 2007; Kwon and Kang 2011).

Indeed, Holliday (2000) saw two central tenets of ‘East Asian productivism’, namely a growth-oriented development strategy and that all aspects of state policy including social policy are designed to achieve this goal. Similarly, Wilding (2008: 22) explained the role of productivist social policy as ‘securing a ready supply of appropriately qualified personnel to service the economy, securing political and social stability, ensuring the smooth operation of the labor market and so on’. These key features of productivist social policy suggest a fundamental difference compared with traditional welfare capitalism in Western countries (Esping-Andersen 1990) leading Holliday (2000: 711), amongst others, to argue that it is ‘impossible to place [East Asian cases] in Esping-Andersen’s framework’. Although these East Asian economies have had good social outcomes in terms of health, education, affluence indicators (UNDP 2016), segmented and underdeveloped welfare programmes have thus arguably prevailed (see e.g. Midgley and Tang 2009). The literature on East Asian welfare development and change has moved on considerably in many respects, but the question whether cases in Asia can be classified as distinctly ‘productivist’ has remained subject to lively theoretical debates – not least because of potential shifts occurring in welfare programmes in the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDG) era (Walker and Wong 2005; Mok 2011; Yu *et al.* 2015).

Indeed, a noticeable change in the discourse has occurred within international development studies both as an academic discipline and as a political practice (Devine *et al.* 2015). International organizations began to highlight the positive effects of social protection and distributional policy measures (see e.g. ILO 2014; UNDP 2014) particularly in terms of triggering inclusive pro-poor growth (Balakrishnan *et al.* 2013; Bussolo and Lopez-Calva 2014; Ostry *et al.* 2014). Indeed, recent meta analyses of cash transfer programmes in the Global South find that cash transfers tend to foster economic autonomy, strengthen social networks and stimulate local markets (Bastagli *et al.* 2016) and facilitate long-term social mobility, especially if combined with effective vocational training and access to financial services (Mideros and Gassmann 2017). While human capital investment has been advocated as a key priority to achieve the MDG (UN 2014), the United Nations resolution on sustainable development (UN 2015) specifically aims to reduce inequalities of outcomes as well as to facilitate equality of opportunity.

Policy Responses in Asia

Governments across East Asia have responded to growing welfare expectations and the challenges to existing safety nets to alleviate chronic poverty and rising inequality by increasing social protection efforts that go beyond market-centred, human capital-focused and family-oriented approaches that

have historically dominated the regional welfare discourse (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; Mok and Lau 2014). Most recently, Saunders and He (2017) critically reviewed major measures adopted by different East Asian Chinese societies in managing social protection against the rapid socio-economic changes and the impacts on the disadvantaged population. Recognizing these East Asian societies such as Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong being influenced by Confucian values to varying degrees, a mixed of government, market and civil society measures have been adopted to manage social protection with both productivist and protectionist features, in order to strike a fine balance between economic growth and social welfare provision. As such, Taiwan ROC and South Korea (and at times Hong Kong SAR) were characterized by some authors as 'post-productivist' because they have arguably become more inclusive by successfully combining productive and protective policy measures (see e.g. Choi 2012), whereas Singapore and Malaysia have, arguably, continued to follow a more 'particularist/productivist' path of welfare development (Kühner 2015).

Unlike Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (and EU) countries where family policy has been regarded as a key component of social investment strategies to address the twin challenge of globalization and post-industrialism (Morel *et al.* 2013), working family support in East Asia has typically been classified as 'non-interventionist', 'work-centred' and bound by Confucian ideals of family life (Jones 1993). Yet, while family allowances have remained residual and means-tested, there is increasing diversity in public maternity/parental leave and early education/child care support structures. Indeed, the theoretical focus of East Asian social policy analysis has rapidly been changing as policymakers in the region have sought solutions to persistently low rates of fertility, gendered labour markets and increasing demand for elderly care – all of which have put substantial pressures on social budgets and economic growth. As part of these debates, an increased interest in family policy is evidenced not only by several recent publications on family policy development in Greater China and East Asia (Chau *et al.* 2016; Abrahamson 2017), but also by the theme of a recent conference by the East Asian Social Policy Research Network, focusing on 'Social Policy and Gender in East Asia'.¹ International research funding bodies have supported several projects looking into the productivism-familialism-child well-being nexus in selected East Asian cases in recent years (see e.g. Lau and Gordon 2012; Garritzmman *et al.* 2016).

As these different reforms have unfolded, they have opened up the intriguing possibility of not one, but many East Asian welfare types. This in turn presents new challenges to the business of welfare modelling insofar as it requires a re-examination of how particular East Asian country cases are to be classified into which 'ideal-types', whether the dimensions of welfare provision under scrutiny are the right ones, and the ways in which welfare change in any one country is the outcome of dynamism in the broader East Asian and wider global political economy of development. We address these questions in the following sections.

The largest body of work has, arguably, focused on East Asia because of the flowering of an active East Asian Social Policy Research Network that has

provided a space for sustained discussion and debate. While there has traditionally been some ambiguity in terms of the geographical delineation of 'East Asia', academic interest in relatively recent key cases in the region such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have triggered new debates about the political and economic determinants of welfare state development as well as the potential of social policy provision by alternative means (Chew 2012; Saidi *et al.* 2017; Mongkhonvanit and Hanvoravongchai 2017). Debates about South Asian cases have also featured more frequently in recent years, but these studies have remained more clearly positioned at the cusp between social policy analysis and international development studies (Devine *et al.* 2015). India is set to become the most populous country in Asia by 2050 and has experienced the implementation of a series of social policy innovations under the Congress/United Progressive Alliance leadership (2004–14) (Kühner and Nakray 2017), but also more recently under the Narendra Modi administration (Betz *et al.* 2015; Asher 2017). Bangladesh has made considerable progress both in terms of its economic growth – it is set to soon become a middle-income country – poverty alleviation and gender equality, and has been portrayed as a model for other developing economies in the region (Devine *et al.* 2017).

Yet, not all news is good news: ageing societies have long been argued to threaten the longevity of social protection systems (Schwarz *et al.* 2014), but a broader concern across South Asia has been that the demographic dividend for economic growth that comprises a young educated population might slowly turn into a demographic burden as advancements in human capital formation struggle to keep up with the rapid changes in the demand of global labour markets (Bloom *et al.* 2003). At the same time, Indonesia is just one example of a country in Asia that has experienced a rapid epidemiological change creating a double-burden of disease, with the proportion of non-communicable disease, i.e. tuberculosis, malaria, HIV/AIDS, diarrhoea and pneumonia, as the major cause of death remaining at a high level, while the share of communicable disease, i.e. stroke, heart disease, unipolar depressive disorders and diabetes, as the cause of death has steadily increased, thus asserting substantial pressures on public health policies (see e.g. Tang *et al.* 2013; Barquera *et al.* 2016). The proliferation of key cases of interest beyond East Asia combined with a sense of a persistent, if not growing, divergence of policy responses have opened the door to intriguing Social Policy research agendas going forward.

Bringing Global Social Policy Back In

In the meantime, the now-vast literature on national welfare state development and change in East, South-East and South Asia outlined above is also increasingly engaging with debates in the field of global social policy. Beyond the abstractions of 'globalization' arises a far more interesting field of enquiry, opening up questions about how welfare states are, in practice, being shaped by both globalizing and regionalizing processes, and how these 'touch down' in specific country contexts. The early emphasis on welfare convergence has given way to a better understanding that the unifying economic and

technological processes, which are often taken as evidence of greater global interdependence, sit in tension with evidence of continuing fragmentation of political and social spheres. Far from the unifying convergence forces determining welfare trajectories (and outcomes), we see instead the persistence of varied regional and sub-regional welfare landscapes. This is because countries worldwide are drawn differentially and unequally into processes of global integration, becoming 'tethered' in different ways to global structures (Mittelman 1995; Yeates 2001). Heterogenous changes in relation to welfare states point to far more moderate claims about the nature, effects and implications of centralizing and unifying forces. They offer strong evidence about the moderating and mediating effects of countervailing changes and opposing forces that variously shape, enable and restrict the margin of operation of the state, capital and labour within domestic and transnational spheres of governance. These forces include: the nature and strength of ideologies; cultural and religious values and traditions; social identity (national, ethnic, class); social, religious, political and environmental movements; the strength and balance of political power between political parties, and between organized labour, civil associations and capital, and the political compromises between them; colonial legacy; and, last but by no means least, institutional and employment structures (Yeates 2001, 2017). The unequal incorporation of countries, regions, industries, sectors and workforces into this global economic and political 'mosaic' alongside the continuation of path-dependent welfare systems means that the impacts of globalizing forces and pressures on countries vary according to their position, or rank, within these global and regional hierarchies.

Instead of the anticipated welfare convergence and homogeneity, we find continued variation and difference, with a multiplicity of forms of globalizations encountered and/or engendered in diverse contexts worldwide. Variegated and path-dependent patterns of development (or under-development) across different zones and territories of the world continue to exist (Abu Sharkh and Gough 2010). There continues to be substantial heterogeneity amongst the welfare states of the Triad countries (the EU, North America, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, East Asia) and within OECD countries where economic globalization is said to have been at its most intense. All major reviews of the state of welfare systems internationally conclude with the need for continued attention to substantial and continuing differences in the approaches, policies and outcomes, and evidence of divergence amongst countries within regions. For example, in Latin America and the EU where international integration has a long-historical track-record spanning decades if not centuries, welfare regimes are relatively similar, have developed in a context of a high level of economic integration and transnational actors have been active in reshaping national social policy for many decades. To be sure, degrees of convergence can be detected in relation to social spending, but equally there are many if not more points of divergence in relation to (for example) disaggregated spending in relation to social groups and risks, and the quality of social rights. Distinctively different institutional formations of welfare remain even within these supposed regional 'convergence clubs' (Yeates 2017).

In the Asian context, we also find varied regional (and sub-regional) divisions of labour are the result of different and unequal transactions with extra- and intra-regional centres of production and finance. Furthermore, contemporary institutional trajectories assert the continued relevance of diverse path-dependent modes of development. The notion of a single East Asian model – characterized by state-directed social development underpinned by productivism and filial piety – is therefore increasingly harder to sustain. What we find, instead, are different models in the plural and even different welfare policy typologies within countries. The most recent comparative studies presented by Saunders and He (2017) provide strong evidence revealing diversity and variations of policies and practices in managing social protection across the Chinese societies in East Asia. Ka Ho Mok, Stefan Kühner and Genghua Huang (the second article in this issue) present how Mainland China, as a huge country, has experienced welfare regionalism and variations in terms of social protection measures as strongly influenced by different socio-economic and socio-political environments within the country (see also Qian and Mok 2016). In South-East Asia, the politics of fiscal decentralization and the ensuing geographical dispersion of social policy provision and outcomes is also well documented (see e.g. Pellissery and Anand 2017; Tirtosuharto 2017).

A major theme in global social policy concerns the rise of transnational institutions, actors, ideas and policies – the forms they take and the influence they have on the course of national social policy formation. Border-spanning institutions of governance and policy-making range from international governmental and non-governmental organizations to sub-global – regional – forms of co-operation and coordination (see Deacon *et al.* 2007, 2014; Yeates 2014). What is clear from this vibrant and expansive research literature is that social policy and welfare development touches at the very core of global policy-making, where competing ideologies and strategies of welfare provision are vied for. Welfare issues lie at the core of transnational policy-making – be it in the bureaux and board-rooms of international organizations involving ‘elite’ policy actors or outside them in the many shadow summits and congresses organized by social movement and civil society organizations (Yeates 1999). In the Asian context are diverse international actors involved in the formation of social policy – international organizations (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, International Labour Organization) alongside regional development banks (Asian Development Bank), national banks with regional-scope and ambition (The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China), regional organizations (Association of South-East Asian Nations [ASEAN] and the South Asian Area for Regional Cooperation [SAARC]), Asia-Pacific Regional Cooperation [APEC]), and international aid agencies from outside the region (e.g. Australia in Indonesia) and from within it (Japan, Korea). These do not offer a single model for development, but competing ones. The differences between the inter-governmentalist ASEAN and the SAARC, for example, in terms of their social policy approaches and agendas for action are marked (Chavez 2010; Deacon *et al.* 2010), while the approaches and policies promulgated by these different transnational

organizations to countries in the region are not fixed but change over time and between country. Kaasch *et al.* (2015), for example, found the influence of international organizations and international aid agencies in the development of Indonesian social policy to be more marked than Asian regional organizations and development agencies.

At the same time, the recent histories of social and political activism of new generations of social movements and civil society organizations (CSOs) demonstrate how, in South East Asia and across Latin America and Southern Africa, they organize to shape the course of national public and social policy. They are at the forefront of providing strong resistance to trade liberalization and privatization movements and policies, and in so doing are shaping the regional and global political economy of social development and welfare states. As Olivet and Brennan (2010) state: 'by the development of alternatives from below, [they] are positioning themselves as key agents and players in regional integration processes. They have asserted the need to reclaim regional integration from the forces of neo-liberalism and to shape future regional integration processes that are responsive to the interests of the people' (Olivet and Brennan 2010: 64). Whether organizing across international state borders or not, they must be factored in among the actors and environments producing and shaping welfare states, and their degrees of resilience and resistance to social change.

In fact, national policies are the outcome not just of dynamics in the domestic sphere, but also in the transnational (or cross-border) sphere – and of the interaction between the two. In other words, national and transnational forces 'co-produce' social policy (Yeates 2017). A range of transnational actors and forces weave and fuse ostensibly national welfare regimes more closely than has often been given credit, while the socio-institutional characteristics and policies of countries influence the policies, practices of transnational institutions and actors. These include: the internationalizing strategies of households and families; strategies of political resistance and opposition involving CSOs' activating across borders; transnational political fora and mechanisms of cross-border governance and policy-making (as in regional multilateral bodies such as ASEAN, ASEAN +3, SAARC, APEC in the Asian context); international governmental organizations and overseas aid agencies working within the region to deliver development aid and influence the course of social policy; the internationalizing strategies of corporate capital and cross-border trade and investment. Each of these has different relations (historical and contemporary) with countries within the East Asian region, and also different practices of leveraging social policy change. Undeniably, regional and global divisions of labour, and of fragmentation alongside unification trends, co-exist. We see how states, and national economies are increasingly interlinked and structurally interconnected with one another in dense networks of regional and extra-regional global economic and political relations. 'Globalising forces are variable, uneven, unfinished and contested. They are not fixed but dynamic. They change over time and between places. Context-specific factors, notably history and geography, remain of immense importance in mediating processes of welfare formation and restructuring' (Yeates 2014, 2017).

New Research Agendas in Asian Social Policy Analysis

It is against this background of the fusion of global, regional and national institutions, dynamics and outcomes, that this special regional issue is situated. The first article, by Theodoros Papadopoulos and Antonios Roumpakis, provides an innovative perspective on the role of the family in Asian context not only as part of the oft-quoted 'welfare diamond', but increasingly crucial also as an economic actor in the social reproduction of welfare capitalism. Based on the Polanyian conceptualization of 'oikos', Papadopoulos and Roumpakis argue that the family in East and South East Asia retains its key role despite slowly increasing and diverging public support available to working families with children. Basing their analysis on recent conceptual discussions of the changing Mainland Chinese 'social model' and local data on social expenditures and minimum income standards among the Chinese provinces, Ka Ho Mok, Stefan Kühner and Genghua Huang, in the second article, argue that the various social policy initiatives under the Hu-Wen leadership (2003–13) have yet to amount to a qualitative shift in the core foundation of the human capital-focused welfare production logic in China. Due to persistent, even growing, fragmentation of selective welfare pragmatism, they suggest that regarding China as multiple 'welfare types' is the most fruitful path for future academic inquiry.

Following on from this, Yeun-wen Ku, in the third article, highlights a different set of regional dynamics in his focus on how Taiwan's relationship to the regional hegemon, China, has conditioned respective governments' attempts to address global economic challenges. Rather than democratization, which has long been regarded as one of the main driving forces of welfare development in the region, he argues that it is these regional and global factors that have ultimately resulted in respective Taiwanese governments' failure to fully meet the welfare expectations of the Taiwanese citizens. Soo Ann Lee and Jiwei Qian, in the fourth article, also consider the different internal and external problem pressures and social conditions that have led to a reconfiguration of social policies in Singapore. Unlike China and Singapore, however, Lee and Qian show that the policy approach in this city-state has continued to be much more directly driven by the economic prerogative. Nevertheless, social development has been achieved despite relatively limited expansions of government expenditures and social rights, strengthening the assessment of Singapore remaining as one of the proto-productivist welfare economies not only in the region, but also more globally. Lastly, Mulyadi Sumarto, in the fifth article, makes clear the visibility of international influences on domestic social policy reform in highlighting multiple changes of the Indonesian welfare regime characteristics in the pre- and post Soeharto era. Thereby, borrowing from historical institutional accounts of welfare state change, Sumarto shows the complicated, even at times contradicting, dynamics of layering government-formal social programmes on top of more traditional community-based informal welfare arrangements.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue therefore give rise to the following questions: Is it any longer possible to identify one or more East Asian regional social model(s)? What is the balance between forces of 'convergence'

and 'divergence' in the region? How (if at all) are the social organization and relations of welfare being remade over larger integrative scales, and with what effects? How can we understand social policy (as a field of political practice) as embedded in an international society of nations, marked by trans-border institutions, policies and practices that shape the governance of territories and populations? These are major issues of our time, for they speak to the broader question of what analytical bases and research strategies can best reveal the complexities of (and interactions between) national, extra-national and trans-national drivers of welfare formation and development under contemporary but diverse conditions.

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Notes

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1. East Asian Social Policy Research Network (<http://www.welfareasia.org>), Social Policy and Gender in East Asia Conference, 1–2 July 2016, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea.
2. Inaugural Conference of the Global Alliance for Educational Change and Social Development, Promoting Educational Change and Social Development in the Highly Competitive World, 9–10 April 2015, Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

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